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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA - FIRST LADY TELLS U/S OTERO OF FGM PROGRESS, TIP CHALLENGES

SUMMARY

1. (U) In a January 30 meeting, Ethiopian First Lady Azeb Mesfin told Under Secretary of State Maria Otero that after four years of intensive engagement with community and religious leaders in the Afar region, her efforts on behalf of the Ethiopian Government (GoE) have prompted a significant reduction in Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Despite the Ethiopian parliament having passed a law on Trafficking in Persons (TIP) last year, however, Azeb acknowledged that human trafficking from Ethiopia remains a challenge. The meeting highlighted a potentially strong advocate and partner for U.S. collaboration within the GoE for addressing trafficking and women's issues. End Summary.

2. (U) Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero held a 75 minute meeting with Ethiopian First Lady and Member of Parliament Azeb Mesfin on January 30 on the margins of the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa. Azeb was joined by Ms. Netsanet Asfaw, Member of Parliament. Under Secretary Otero was accompanied by Charge d'Affaires John Yates, USAID/Ethiopia Mission Director Tom Staal, Special Advisor and Special Assistant to the Under Secretary, P/ECouns, and notetaker.

MAKING PROGRESS ON FGM IN AFAR

3. (U) Azeb noted that FGM remains prominent in the Muslim-dominated Afar and Somali regions of Ethiopia, where it is largely perpetuated by women themselves who target girls as early as seven years old in this traditional rite. Both Azeb and Netsanet argued that FGM was so prominent in Afar due to the region's local interpretation of elements of the Quran.

4. (U) Azeb noted that over the past four years, she has actively engaged to raise community awareness about, and stem the tide of, such practices. As a result of her active interventions, community discussions and debates, and advocacy, Azeb reported that Afari regional leaders have now declared FGM to be a "Haram," or a forbidden practice. By engaging religious leaders, Azeb and other advocates against FGM were able to secure such a shift in local interpretation of what had been seen as a "Quranic practice." Azeb highlighted that, when it comes to countering FGM, communication remains "a best practice," noting the importance of engaging both women and men. Azeb proudly commented how one can now find Afari girls who have not been mutilated. While the practice remains widespread in the Somali region, Azeb argued that she and other role models had to select one area in which to focus first, but that with tangible progress in Afar they can soon begin focusing on spreading their efforts to the more conflict-prone Somali region.

DESPITE NEW LAW, TRAFFICKING REMAINS A CHALLENGE

5. (U) While Netsanet initially highlighted strong programs within the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) to

facilitate bona fide work overseas for Ethiopians, suggesting that trafficking was a more discrete problem, First Lady Azeb immediately corrected her in arguing that "the problem of trafficking is getting large" with Ethiopian women being sent all over the world. At the same time, Azeb highlighted that the Ethiopian parliament recently passed a law on human trafficking. Still, the new law is not enough; Ethiopians need more information about the threat of trafficking, Azeb argued.

¶16. (U) In response to the First Lady's question as to how the United States responds to the challenge of trafficking in persons, U/S Otero discussed the "three P's" of Protection, Prevention, and Prosecution through the combination of awareness raising, improvement of laws, and the provision of social services. U/S Otero also highlighted the technical assistance that the USG provides to other countries for the development of laws to counter TIP, training of police on identification and response to TIP cases, and awareness raising. The Under Secretary noted the challenge of domestic labor trafficking, stressing the need for not only awareness raising about workers' rights, but also the need to provide training in domestic skills to further empower domestic workers within Ethiopia. She also highlighted grants provided by the State Department to NGOs around the world to help girls who have been trafficked and to improve prosecution. Finally, U/S Otero noted the Department's annual TIP reports as a means of tracking progress and areas for expanded engagement around the world.

COMMENT

¶17. (SBU) Under Secretary Otero's conversation with First Lady Azeb Mesfin highlighted some of the positive progress that Ethiopia has

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seen in recent years in countering FGM and TIP. Certainly the United States deserves a portion of the credit for the positive progress observed in countering FGM in Afar due to a prominent grant from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) to counter this barbaric rite working through Project Concern International (PCI). Conflict and tensions between "highlanders" and Somalis in the Somali region, however, will certainly make countering FGM a more challenging endeavor there.

¶18. (SBU) On the TIP front, Foreign Ministry officials have begun engaging Embassy Officers in recent months to discuss collaboration to increase awareness raising of TIP issues among the Ethiopian diplomatic corps posted overseas, as have Ministry of Justice officials regarding training for prosecutors and judges. Such activism may soon present opportunities to resume USAID assistance to Ethiopia to counter trafficking. (Note: until FY-2006, Ethiopia had received roughly \$250,000 annually to address TIP, but no such funding has been forthcoming in the last few years. Ethiopia is a designated priority country for the U.S. Department of State, and the G/TIP office currently is providing assistance to PCI to address the issue. End Note.) Regardless of the conducive environment for countering TIP and FGM in Ethiopia, however, the restrictive Charities and Societies Proclamation (or CSO Law) passed in January 2009 prohibits foreign assistance from supporting activities that discuss or educate individuals about their rights, thus limiting our ability to engage comprehensively on these issues without a waiver of the law from the GoE. Embassy Addis Ababa will, however, continue to explore ways to collaboration and support Ethiopian efforts against FGM and trafficking. End Comment.

¶19. (U) Under Secretary Otero approved this cable.

YATES